THE HUNDRD GROUPS AND THE RISE OF NAYAR MILITIA IN KERALA

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The great scholars who edited and published many epigraphic records of the Cera Perumals of Kodungallur or Makotai--T. A. Gopinatha Rao, K. V. Subramanya Ayyar, A.S. Ramanatha Ayyar etc, had faiied to reeognize the fact that they were dealing with the documents of the legendary Ceraman Perumals from the Keralolpatti chronicle. Partly due to the erroneous but deep rooted belief that the Cera Perumals disappeared from the scene long before the 9th century, and partly due to their inability to reconstruct their chronolegy or identify their capital, these pioneers had to be satisfied with a word for word translation of the records. With all the published records before him, Prof. Elamkulam found it possible to group the inscriptions of the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries under a heading, solve some of the chronological problems and establish some continuity of rule among these Perumals. With the help of contemporary literary works he was able to identify their headquarters at Makotai or Kodungallur : and he christened the kingdom, rather arbitrarily, as the Kulasekhara empire.[1] He put forward some useful and some questionable hypotheses about the social conditions of the age.[2]

In the outline of socie-political and economic history provided by Prof. Elamkulam there are certain glaring omissions—like the failure to indentify the temple-centred villages as Brahmin settlements of a particular type, and the failure to offer a convincing explanation for the Hundred Groups mentioned along with the governors of the Nadus or districts. The first problem has been dealt with by the present writer elsewhere. The object of this paper is to describe the character and function of the Hundred Groups and place them in a historical perspective.

These groups make their appearance in several inscriptions of this period, to be labelled correctly as the later Cera period or the Makotai Cera

period, between the 8th and the 12th century of the Christian era. They are found in close association with the governors of districts called Nadu Vale or Nadu Udaiyavar etc. Thus we have *Annurruvar* or The Five Hundred of Puraikilanadu in the northern part of Kerala, *Ezhunurruvar* or The Seven Hundred of Kurumporainadu, *Arunurruvar* or The Six Hundred of Ramavalanadu, Arunurruvar or The Six Hundred of Valluvanadu *Arunurruvar* or The Six Hundred of Kilmalainadu, *Munnurruvar* or The Threee Hundred of Nanrulainadu and *Arumurruvar* or The six Hundred of Venadu in the Cera times[3]. The *Elamkur* or Junior Princes of Kurumporainadu, Eralanadu, and Venadu had the *Muunurruvar* or Three Hundred associated with them.[4] The Perumal or Cera king had a group called *Ayiram* or the Thousand with him[5].

In their comments on the *Arunurruvar* or The Six Hundred of Venad mentioned in the Syrian Copper Plates, one of the four or five early documents of Kerala known to them, Dr. Gundert, William Logan and K. P. Padmanabha Menon had suggested the possibility of this being an 'assembly' of Nayars which controlled and contained the royal authority like the Parliament in Great Britain[6]. They did not have a chance to examine the term in other records and other contexts, but it was an intelligent guess mixed with a good deal of sentimental admiration for the Nayar 'Koottams', literally meaning assemblies, functioning aggressively in the principalities of medieval times. Prof. Elamkulam had a stubborn anti-caste bias and refused to see the formation of Nambudiri and Nayar groups except when they were directly referred to by their present day caste suffixes. This is not the historian's way of fighting the caste system. Even if a system is bad it could have been progressive in the beginning or it would not have come into existence by defeating an earlier system. Quite apart from this question of good and evil, the historian has to look into causal connections, proto-forms and beginnings in his quest for understanding social evolution. However, while Prof. Elamkulam ingored without a careful study the suggestion about the Nayar element and its continuity, he somehow took up the notion of a popular assembly which is not suggested by any piece of evidence.[7] While the large numbers justify the postulate of an assembly or at least a group, the concept of a popular or democratic assembly is anachronistic and untenable unless its existence is indepently proved.

A closer examination of the epigraphic records would reveal that

the Parliament-like role of The Six Hundred of Venad, and similar bodies in other districts, was a mere figment of imagination. William Logan was projecting backwards what he knew about Nayars in medieval times for, according to him, Malabar was a happy land without history, without serious change from the beginning of the Christian era.[8] Many patriotic writers took the cue from this British administrator of the 19th century, and even a distinguished historian like Prof. R. C. Majumdar, who had to depend on regional writings for his material, visualised a 'state council' and 'the remnant of the old Samiti' of the Vedic age.[9] Now that we possess, not one but several references to the Hundred Groups, and that too not just in one district but in most of the districts of the Cera kingdom, it is possible to analyse their character and function with greater confidence.

The first and most striking observation to be made is that, although groups consisting of hundreds of men certainly existed as indicated by the number labels, there is nothing to show that a congregation was present wherever their name is mentioned. On the other hand, a record from Tirunanmandur suggests that the term '*Nanrulainattu Munnurruvar*', i. e. The Three Hundred of Nanrulainadu, denoted just three persons, most probably the three leaders of The Three Hundred, each Hundred being represented by one leader.[10] This clarification is applicable to other situations involving such groups and it also throws light on the composition of the councils in a very interesting manner. For example, the governor's council which met in the presence of Ayya Atikal, Governor of Venad, at Kollam, consisted of *Ancuvannam Manigramam* and *Arunurruvar*. In the case of the first two groups, it is mentioned that the two leaders acted for their corporations and by the application of the principle that we found in the record cited earlier it would appear that The Six Hunered were represented by the six leaders in this case. Therefore it could have been just the court of the governor composed of the Perumal's representative, the officials, the leaders of two mercantile corporations and the leaders of the body of Six Hundred, whatever be its nature. The picture of a unique assembly of several corporations at Kollam will have to be replaced by the humble picture of an ordinary feudal court with its usual appendages. The implications of this change for the analysis of inscriptions with parallel situations in South India may be discussed elsewhere.

When there is no account of an actual assembly or congregation

meeting frequently to decide about important issues, the question of the assembly functioning as a check on royal authority does not arise. The functions of the Hundred Groups will have to be studied afresh in the light of available evidence.

In the first place it may be mentioned that these groups were not independent of royal authority or hostile to royal authority but firmly attached to the office and person of the ruling prince. Thus the *Ezhunurruvar* or The Seven Hundred of Kurumporainad are mentioned in a record as *Mutta Kurril Ezhunurruvar*, meaning The Seven Hundred belonging to the senior prince, and again as *Mutta Kurrinukkamainca Nizhal* or The *Nizhal* attached to the senior prince.[12] The use of the term '*Nizhal*' to denote them clarifies their position. In Malayalam language the term *Nizhal* means 'shadow' in the literal sense, and trusted agents or representatives in the administrtive terminology.[13] Again, the chief duty of The Hundred, as indicated in the records of the Cera period, revolves round the terms '*kaval*' and '*raksha*' both signifying protection i.e. protection of property and privileges. In some cases they are asked to oversee *(kantu celuttikka)* or supervise. Thus the *Arunurruvar* of Venad, Ancuvannam and Manikkiraman are jointly asked to protect *(rakshikka)* the *Palli* - the Christian Church of Tarsa at Kollam -and the landed properties granted to it by the governor at the instance of Mar Sapir Iso.[14] The *Munnurrnvar* of Nanruzhainad are enjoined to oversee that the routine expenses of the temple are met from the revenue of the land allotted for the purpose and handed over to tenants[15]; and in case of default or violation of rules they are also authorised to 'die and kill' in order to keep it alive.[16] These people are nominated as the gaurdians of two other offerings in the same temple.[17] In Tirumelli, the governor of Puraikizhanadu places his own land, gifted to the temple, subordinate to The Five Hundred who formed his retinue on his pilgrimage to the remote hillshrine.[18] A *Cerikkal* (crown estate) donated to the Irinjalakkuda temple is placed under the protection *(kaval)* of The Six Hundred of Valluvanadu.[19] The *Devasvam* and *Brahmasvam* lands of Tiruvanur temple, near Calicut, are made subordinate *(kizhidu)* to The Six Hundred of Ramavalanadu.[20] At Tirukkadittanam there is a record related to an endowment stating that if there is trouble and the officials and proprietors fail to remove it, the *Naduvazhi* (governor), and the nominees of the *Munnurruvar* (The Three Hundred), were to redress *(veetikka)* the grievance.[21] The *Ur* (village concil), the nominees (of

The Six Hundred) of Kizhmalainadu and The Three Hundred of Nanruzhainadu and The *Poduvalmar* (Secretaries of Village Council) were jointly to redress all grievances related to an endowment in the same temple.[22] A record of Kinalur, near Badagara, gives The Three Hundred of Kurumporainadu the right to rectify errors and supervise the endowments in that place.[23]

These assignments of protection and guardianship of property, sometimes explicitly associated with the power to employ violence even to kill, confirm the military or para-military character of The Hundred organization. They are attached to princes and junior princes in the districts, and even though they figure mostly in connection with the protection of the property of the temples and churches, they are obviously not functionaries connected with the religious functions of the temple. Since they are admitted into the temple precincts where these meetings were held, it is also clear that the groups were made up of castes which were socially acceptable to the Brahmin and Kshatriya elites of the courts and temples. Then they could only have been the precursors of the Nayars whom we come across in all medieval records functioning as the 'eye and the arm', as the ruling and fighting classes, having the ritual status of the Sudras but the actual status of Kshatriyas in Kerala.

In this connection the present writer would like to draw attention to his earlier paper on *Companions of Honour* in which it has been argued that from the time of the *Arthasastra* the royal bodyguards called *Asanna* and *Dasavargika* in that text and known by different labels at different times in different kingdoms of South India, played a crucial role in upholding and maintaining Hindu monarchy in all parts of India.[24] These high officials were selected after the most severe tests and were supposed to follow a most austere pattern of life. They were under an oath to live and die with the king, and for the king, and they were obliged to rally round the king in the field of battle. From the late ancient period onwards we find them being remunerated by gifts of large estates and we notice that this office, like all others, became hereditary, sometimes crystalising into a caste or sub-caste in accordance with the law of what the present writer has preferred to characterise as *Jatikarana*.[25] The case of The Hundred Groups offers a perfect example of that process extending in Kerala from late ancient to late

medleval times. The continuity of the basic organizational pattern of The Hundred Group is attested by Graem's Glossary of Terms, prepared in the 19th century for the convenience of British administrators, according to which a *Naduvazhi*. the ruler of a small principality, had at least one hundred Nayars, militia men, attached to his range. It is a blessing for the historian that in the absence of major socio-political upheaval resulting from Pathan-Turkish-Mughal incursions in other parts of India, Kerala preserved many feudal relic institutions just as it did in the case of many tribal relic institutions from an earlier phase.

NOTE & REFERENCES

1 Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, Kottayam, 1970 Chap. XV. The Second Chera Empire, pp. 217-66

2 M. G. S. Narayanan, *Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the Kulasekharas*, Ph. D. Thesis in Kerala University, 1962, unpublished. In this the author has carried out a major revision of the history of the Chera times.

3 *Ibid.*. Chapter 7, Divisions of the Kingdom.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, Chapter 9 - Police and Revenue. Their caste status is suggested by the relic institution called *Onnu Kure Ayiram* which continues to exist as a Nayar group in charge of the Bhagavathi temple to this day in Cranganore.

6 Logan, *Malabar II* 1895, App. XII. No. 1, p. CCXI

7 Elamkulam, *Op. cit*; p. 250

8 Logan, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Preface. The author possessed a romantic view of the timelessness of Nayar groups in Kerala.

9 R. C. Majumdar, *Corporate Life in Ancient India*, p. 132.

10 *T.A.S.* V., 10, p. 34

11 *E. I.* XVI. No 27, pp. 339-45. 11. 5-11

12 Narayanan *op. cit.* Chap. 9. Police and Revenue. See also *I. A.* XX. pp. 285-90. 11. 19-21 and *T.A.S.* V. I. pp. 63-86. 11. 12-13

13 Narayanan, "The Institution of Companions of Honour with special reference to South India", *Journal of Indian History*, Golden Jubilee Volume, 1973, pp. 181-92.

14 See Note No. 3 above. Also *I.A. XX* pp. 285-90, 11, 26-7

15 *T.A,S.* II No. 9 (II) pp. 80-5, 11. 21-2

16 *Ibid.*, 1. 12.

17 *Ibid.*, No; 4 (B) pp. 24-5, 1.6.

18 *I.A.* XX. pp. 285-90, 11. 26-7.

19 *Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin* (Trichur) Vol. IX, Part I, pp. 44-1.19

20 *S.I.I.*, V. 784, p. 338, 11. G-7

21 *T.A.S.* V. 55. pp. 181-3, 1. 3

22 *Ibid.*, V. 59, pp. 181-3. 1. 3

23 *S. I. I.* VII. No. 174, 11.51-3

24 Supra, n. 13. See Note No. 2 - Chapter X. Social System, A. Brahmin Settlers. Also Note No. 8.

25 Narayanan, M.G.S., Presidential Address, Ancient India, *Indian History Congress*; Hyderabad, 1978.